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**ENVIRONMENTAL PROTECTION  
AGENCY****40 CFR Part 300****(FRL-3730-8)****RIN 2050 AB73****Hazard Ranking System****AGENCY:** Environmental Protection  
Agency.**ACTION:** Final rule.

**SUMMARY:** The Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) is adopting revisions to the Hazard Ranking System (HRS), the principal mechanism for placing sites on the National Priorities List (NPL). The revisions change the way EPA evaluates potential threats to human health and the environment from hazardous waste sites and make the HRS more accurate in assessing relative potential risk. These revisions comply with other statutory requirements in the Superfund Amendments and Reauthorization Act of 1986 (SARA).

**DATES:** Effective date March 14, 1991. As discussed in Section III H of this preamble, comments are invited on the addition of specific benchmarks in the air and soil exposure pathways until January 14, 1991.

**ADDRESSES:** Documents related to this rulemaking are available at and comments on the specific benchmarks in the air and soil exposure pathways may be mailed to the CERCLA Docket Office, OS-245, U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, Waterside Mall, 401 M Street, SW, Washington, DC 20460, phone 202-382-3046. Please send four copies of comments. The docket is available for viewing by appointment only from 9:00 am to 4:00 pm, Monday through Friday, excluding Federal holidays. The docket number is 105NCP-HRS.

**FOR FURTHER INFORMATION CONTACT:** Steve Caldwell or Agnes Ortiz, Hazardous Site Evaluation Division, Office of Emergency and Remedial Response, OS-230, U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, 401 M Street, SW, Washington, DC 20460, or the Superfund Hotline at 800-424-9346 (in the Washington, DC area, 202-382-3000).

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**I. Background**

In 1980, Congress enacted the Comprehensive Environmental Response, Compensation, and Liability Act (CERCLA) (42 U.S.C. 9601 *et seq.*), commonly called the Superfund, in response to the dangers posed by uncontrolled releases of hazardous substances, contaminants, and pollutants. To implement section 105(b)(1) of CERCLA and Executive Order 12316 (46 FR 42237, August 20, 1981), the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) revised the National Oil and Hazardous Substances Pollution Contingency Plan (NCP), 40 CFR part 300, on July 16, 1982 (47 FR 31180), with later revisions on September 18, 1985 (50 FR 37824), November 20, 1985 (50 FR 47912), and March 8, 1990 (55 FR 8666). The NCP sets forth guidelines and procedures for responding to releases or potential release of hazardous substances, pollutants, or contaminants.

Section 105(b)(1) of CERCLA (now section 105(a)(1)(A)) requires EPA to establish:

Criteria for determining priorities among releases or threatened releases [of hazardous substances] throughout the United States for the purpose of taking remedial action and, to the extent practicable taking into account the potential urgency of such action, for the purpose of taking removal action. Criteria and priorities . . . shall be based upon the relative risk or danger to public health or welfare or the environment . . . taking into account to the extent possible the population at risk, the hazard potential of the hazardous substances at such facilities, the potential for contamination of drinking water supplies, the potential for direct human contact, [and] the potential for destruction of sensitive ecosystems . . .

To meet this requirement and help set priorities, EPA adopted the Hazard Ranking System (HRS) as appendix A to the NCP (47 FR 31180, July 16, 1982). The HRS is a scoring system used to assess the relative threat associated with actual or potential releases of hazardous

substances at sites. The HRS is the primary way of determining whether a site is to be included on the National Priorities List (NPL), the Agency's list of sites that are priorities for long-term evaluation and remedial response, and is a crucial part of the Agency's program to address the identification of actual and potential releases. (Each State can nominate one site to the NPL as a State top priority regardless of its HRS score; sites may also be added in response to a health advisory from the Agency for Toxic Substances and Disease Registry [see NCP, 40 CFR 300.425(c)(3)].) Under the original HRS, a score was determined for a site by evaluating three migration pathways—ground water, surface water, and air. Direct contact and fire and explosion threats were also evaluated to determine the need for emergency actions, but did not enter into the decision on whether to place a site on the NPL.

In 1986, Congress enacted the Superfund Amendments and Reauthorization Act of 1986 (SARA) (Pub. L. 99-499), which added section 105(c)(1) to CERCLA, requiring EPA to amend the HRS to assure "to the maximum extent feasible, that the hazard ranking system accurately assesses the relative degree of risk to human health and the environment posed by sites and facilities subject to review." Congress, in its Conference Report on SARA, stated the substantive standard against which HRS revisions could be assessed:

This standard is to be applied within the context of the purpose for the National Priorities List; i.e., identifying for the States and the public those facilities and sites which appear to warrant remedial actions. . . . This standard does not, however, require the Hazard Ranking System to be equivalent to detailed risk assessments, quantitative or qualitative, such as might be performed as part of remedial actions. The standard requires the Hazard Ranking System to rank sites as accurately as the Agency believes is feasible using information from preliminary assessments and site inspections . . . Meeting this standard does not require long-term monitoring or an accurate determination of the full nature and extent of contamination at sites or the projected levels of exposure such as might be done during remedial investigations and feasibility studies. This provision is intended to ensure that the Hazard Ranking System performs with a degree of accuracy appropriate to its role in expeditiously identifying candidates for response actions. [H.R. Rep. No. 962, 99th Cong., 2nd Sess. at 199-200 (1986)]

Section 105(c)(2) further specifies that the HRS appropriately assess the human health risks associated with actual or potential contamination of surface waters used for recreation or drinking